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SUBJECT: UNHCR: EXCOM CABLE #8: MEETING ON AFGHAN REFUGEES
ENCOURAGES CONTINUED INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

REF: GENEVA 2465

1. (SBU) Summary: This cable provides a readout of an October 7 meeting in Geneva on the situation of Afghan refugees in Iraq and Pakistan. The meeting occurred, and the cable was drafted, before the October earthquake in Kashmir. At this time, it is still unclear what ramifications, if any, that natural disaster will have on Pakistan's position with regard to Afghan refugees -- or on UNHCR's refugee-focused programs in Pakistan. Representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, the U.S., other interested countries, UNHCR and other international organizations met October 7 to discuss ongoing efforts to care for Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan and to facilitate their orderly and voluntary return and reintegration. PRM Acting A/S Rich Greene praised the generosity of host countries and urged continued patience. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Guterres stressed the need for donors and international organizations (IOs) to integrate refugee assistance with development goals. The Iranian delegation announced it would offer work visas for 200,000 Afghans and pledged to work closely with the Afghan government. The Pakistani delegation gave a more hard-line speech rejecting local integration as a durable solution, although they evinced more flexibility in private discussions. Pakistan is still negotiating with UNHCR regarding refugee registration modalities. The meeting served to mobilize donors and major humanitarian and development agencies, especially UNHCR and UNDP, to stay engaged. Participants agreed that a follow-on meeting should occur next year only if tangible progress had been made on development, reintegration, and registration. End summary.

Meeting Goals and Attendance

2. (U) PRM Acting Assistant Secretary Richard L. Greene opened the Geneva consultations by highlighting the major achievements in Afghanistan over the last four years: two successful nationwide elections, significant improvements in infrastructure and health, and the voluntary return of over four million Afghan refugees. He then outlined the day's primary goals: (1) to maintain international support for the continued repatriation and reintegration of Afghan refugees; (2) to ensure the sustainability of returns by improving conditions for returnees in Afghanistan; (3) to encourage international support for development in refugee-impacted areas of Pakistan; (4) to work toward normalizing population movement in and out of Afghanistan; and (5) to support a registration of Afghans currently living in Pakistan. He both introduced and concluded his remarks by thanking the refugee-hosting countries for their great sacrifices in caring for millions of Afghan refugees for well over two decades. He asked the countries, as well as the refugees themselves, to maintain their patience, however. While the pace of returns has been staggering -- the largest refugee return in UNHCR history -- it will still take some time before the situation is fully resolved. In the meantime, he encouraged countries to continue to work with one another to come to agreements on refugee support, repatriation, registration, and movement.

3. (U) In his opening address, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres said a major goal for the following months would be to effectively integrate refugees into Afghanistan's overall national development. In view of both their numbers and importance, displaced people should be taken into account within the so-called "Kabul Process" -- the successor to the "Bonn Process" for Afghanistan's development that concluded with the recent parliamentary elections. In highlighting the points initially raised by A/S Greene in his opening statement, HC Guterres said he understood the challenge of integrating Afghans into development proposals within Pakistan and Iran. (Note: Despite recent polling showing that only a minority of Afghans in Pakistan intend to repatriate in the near future, the GOP insists that the 2.6 million Afghans currently on its soil should return to Afghanistan. End note.) Guterres stressed the importance of acknowledging the reality of population movement, even if that reality appears unpalatable. He cited the example of Geneva itself: although Guterres's native Portugal has not recently experienced civil war, thousands of his fellow citizens currently reside

in the Swiss city. Planners must acknowledge the fact that people migrate for multiple reasons, even long after the conflicts that initially launched them have ended. The High Commissioner concluded his remarks by thanking Iran and Pakistan for their ongoing support of Afghan refugees, and by acknowledging Afghanistan's hard work to bring its citizens home.

14. (SBU) In discussions prior to the consultations, UNHCR told PRM that a major purpose of the meetings was to demonstrate to the governments of Pakistan and Iran that the world remained engaged in the Afghan situation. UNHCR believes this is important in order to ensure that the two governments continue to cooperate with each other, as well as Afghanistan and the world community. From this perspective, the conference appeared to be a success.

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Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan
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15. (U) Following the introduction to the meetings by co-chairs PRM and UNHCR, the floor was given to Afghanistan and its two neighbors. The head of the Iranian delegation, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Gholam Ali Khoshroo began by noting that more than 1.3 million Afghan refugees had returned to their homeland from Iran since April of 2002. While a further 200,000 returns had been predicted this year, he acknowledged that the numbers had lagged (50,000 have returned so far). Khoshroo applauded the work of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) in researching the causes of migration and dislocation in South Asia. Their work showed, he said, that most Afghans in Iran are now economic migrants rather than refugees fleeing political or natural disasters. Durable solutions must be found for true refugees, and new modalities must be worked out to govern economic migration. Khoshroo declared that the government of Iran (GoI) will issue working visas to 200,000 Afghans, under the condition that only the head of household may remain in Iran, and other family members must return to Afghanistan. In a short concluding statement later in the afternoon, the Iranian delegation pledged to continue working with UNHCR, its neighbors, and international donors to find solutions in the best interests of the Afghans.

16. (SBU) According to a delegate who was sitting in the dais with a direct view of the Iranian delegation, there appeared to be some disagreement between the Iranians before Khoshroo issued his concluding statement. The Iranian permanent representative in Geneva exchanged some heated words with Khoshroo then left the room while Khoshroo issued the brief concluding statement. According to the UNHCR delegate, the skirmish likely centered on how conciliatory Iran should be in its closing statement. With a new government in office, he said, the Iranians still appeared to be in the process of sorting out their official policy. The permrep may have been arguing for a firmer statement insisting that Afghans must return to Iran, similar to the Pakistani concluding statement (see below).

17. (U) The Afghan delegation was led by Minister for Refugees and Repatriation Mohammad Azam Dadfar. (Note: Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, who was originally scheduled to head the delegation, flew back to Kabul for a discussion of NATO expansion in Afghanistan. End note.) Dadfar began his remarks by noting Afghanistan's recent accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention. He thanked his neighbors, the Iranians and the Pakistanis, for their continued assistance in hosting Afghan refugees, as well as the USG, UNHCR, and the European Commission (EC) for planning and hosting the discussions. Dadfar noted that real progress has been made in the last several years: 4.25 million refugees had returned, and he hoped to "eliminate the word IDP from Afghanistan's dictionary by the end of 2006." Minister Dadfar concluded by emphasizing Afghanistan's continued need for development assistance, particularly to ensure the sustainability of refugee returns. He strongly supported HC Guterres's contention that displaced populations must be made a major plank of the Kabul Process.

18. (SBU) The head of the Pakistani delegation, Secretary Sajid Hussain Chattha of the States and Frontiers Division (SAFRON), emphasized the need for continued large-scale repatriation and development of refugee-affected areas within Pakistan. Unlike the February Afghan conference in Brussels (reftel), where the Pakistani delegation accepted that significant numbers of Afghans may stay in Pakistan for a "temporary" period, Chattha in Geneva made no such statement. This was especially notable in his blunt closing statement, where he insisted that Pakistan was not prepared to accept a long-term Afghan presence on its soil. Now is not the time, he said, to discuss local integration; Pakistan has been hosting its "brothers" for well over two decades, but the Afghans remaining in Pakistan are now economic migrants, and the time has come for them to return home. Chattha spoke of the importance of providing development funding to

refugee-affected areas of Pakistan, and thanked UNHCR for its work in conducting a needs assessment. But he did not acknowledge a central premise of UNHCR in conducting the assessment: that it would look at the needs of both Afghan and Pakistani communities. Instead, Chattha spoke as if the entire purpose was to assist a post-Afghan Pakistan.

9. (SBU) In a bilateral meeting with the USG delegation prior to the start of the conference, Chattha appeared somewhat less dogmatic, acknowledging that some Afghans would likely remain in Pakistan past the end of the Tripartite Agreement. In particular, he noted the longstanding historical linkages among Pashtuns on both sides of the border, and said that certain kinds of migration and labor movement were to be expected. He welcomed the work being done by IOM to look into possible future means of managing the migration. In terms of numbers, however, he spoke in terms of "some thousands" rather than the million or more Afghans recent research suggests will likely seek to stay in Pakistan.

10. (SBU) Chattha also spoke of the GoP,s plans to conduct a registration of Afghan refugees, as a follow-on to the census completed earlier this year. The purpose of the registration is to collect precise information on Afghans in Pakistan, while providing Afghans with some legal document entitling them to temporary employment and health care in Pakistan. While UNHCR, the GoA, and the GoP all agree on the need for a registration, UNHCR and the GoA disagree with Pakistan over the appropriate validity period of the identity documents to be provided to Afghans. The GoP insists the documents should only have a two-year validity period -- i.e., through 2008, assuming the registration occurs as planned in 2006. The GoA insists on a five-year validity period, while UNHCR is publicly calling for an indefinite validity period. In private discussions after the conference ended, UNHCR delegates told PRM that they are willing to accept a five-year validity period, but are having no luck budging the Pakistani position. UNHCR plans to draft an MOU to the GoP pushing for a five-year validity period as a condition for receiving UNHCR assistance in funding and planning the registration. They expect the GoP to initially reject these terms, and believe that the negotiations will ultimately have to go to President Musharraf before a decision will be made.

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International organizations and donors
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11. (U) Following the statements of the three regional countries, the floor was opened to the other delegations. The first to speak was Heino Marius of the European Commission, which had co-hosted the Brussels consultations in February. Marius said that the EC is currently putting together a plan for its 2007-2013 funding priorities that would concentrate heavily on assistance in northern and northeastern areas of Afghanistan where large numbers of refugees had returned. Following the EC, most of the delegations made brief statements outlining their previous work in Afghanistan and committing to remain involved. Donor countries included Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

12. (U) A number of international organizations also spoke at the consultations. The World Bank,s intervention was most notable for declining to support the refugee-affected areas program being mooted by Pakistan and UNHCR. The World Bank representative at the consultations, Joseph Ingram, said the Bank fully supported the stabilization of Afghanistan and its neighbors, but was looking to do so with alternative livelihoods programs and its own development programs. While Ingram said the World Bank in principle supports the normalization of Afghan labor in Pakistan and Iran, setting its parameters is the responsibility of the three countries and bilateral donors.

13. (U) A more positive statement was delivered by James Rawley of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which, despite earlier concerns about working at cross-purposes with UNHCR, pledged to collaborate closely with its sister UN agency on a needs assessment for refugee-affected areas in Pakistan. Other international organizations speaking at the consultations included IOM, ILO, and the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA). Both IOM and ILO emphasized their work in researching Afghan migration and labor patterns in neighboring countries. (Note: These two organizations, along with the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) have received funding from the EC to examine labor migration in and around Afghanistan.) UNAMA was represented by Filippo Grandi, in his last appearance in that organization before beginning his new job as Deputy Commissioner General at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). He fully endorsed the goal of including displaced Afghans within the overall development plans of the "Kabul Process."

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Comments
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14. (U) Once the Tripartite Agreements between UNHCR, Afghanistan, and Iran and Pakistan expire -- currently scheduled for March and December, respectively, of 2006 -- the legal and logistical framework under which millions of Afghans living outside of Afghanistan are currently regulated will have to be reconsidered. The consultations in Geneva represented an initial effort at coming to terms with several basic issues that will have to be broached: under what circumstances will Afghans be allowed to continue to reside in Pakistan and Iran; under what circumstance and how will they be able to cross borders; what assistance will be provided for communities and areas long inhabited by refugees; and, more generally, how will the international community transition its assistance in South Asia from relief to reconstruction? Several areas of agreement emerged from the consultations. Assisted repatriation should remain the preferred option for Afghans, and all stakeholders should continue to facilitate their voluntary and gradual return to Afghanistan. Development should be ramped up in Afghanistan, especially in areas of high return, to ensure the sustainability of continued refugee repatriation. Donors should continue to support research exploring migration and labor movement across Afghanistan's borders so that Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran can agree on a suitable means of regulating their shared borders. And the needs of returning refugees must be a key element of the Kabul Process.

15. (SBU) From UNHCR's and our perspective, the meeting succeeded in demonstrating to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran that the world remains engaged in the Afghan refugee issue. Although Chattha bristled noticeably in his concluding remarks at the idea -- put forward by several speakers at the consultations -- that local integration in Pakistan will need to be considered as a durable solution for some Afghans, all three delegations made noticeable efforts to strike conciliatory tones with one another. (This was probably due in no small part to the fact that UNHCR helped draft the remarks of both the Pakistani and Afghan delegations.) The consultations left some issues unresolved, however. There remains disagreement between UNHCR, Afghanistan, and Pakistan over the validity period for a proposed registration of Afghans in Pakistan; until the issue is resolved, UNHCR will not seek any funding for the registration. And although UNHCR and UNDP are collaborating on a needs assessment in refugee-impacted areas of Pakistan, it is far from clear that donors will provide significant support. From the Pakistani perspective, the consultations may not have been entirely successful.

16. (SBU) The USG should continue in the near term to support gradual and voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees with UNHCR assistance. The pace of returns continues to be the highest in the world, with over 500,000 refugees expected to return next year. In the meantime, refugee returns should be made an integral part of the Kabul process: efforts should be made to assess and address returnee needs in the areas of shelter, health care, education, sanitation, and livelihoods. In Pakistan, we should work with UNHCR to help convince the GoP to accept a longer validity period for Afghan registration documents. Working to include refugee-affected areas within our development programs would help make this longer period more palatable to the Pakistanis. The general message for all parties should be that they must continue to exercise patience with a steady, but gradual, pace of returns. End Comment.
Moley